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GRACE AND GRATITUDE

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FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:1-20, Matthew 20:1-16

. . . Enter his gates with thanksgiving, . . . for the Lord is good . . .
Psalm 100:4, 5 (NRSV)

When it came to saying "thank you" there was no compromising in my home. I'm not sure why it became such an issue, such a matter of will. The occasion would be minor, by my accounting: a birthday card with a dollar in it, or maybe nothing in it, and my mother would insist that I telephone my aunt or grandmother and say "thank you." "But it was only a card," I would protest. "It doesn't matter," she would respond. "Call her." And if I hesitated the insistence would increase in intensity just enough that I knew it was a serious matter. One time when I was filled with that absolute integrity and self-assurance which makes us so obnoxious during adolescence, I took the issue to her. "But what if I don't mean it? What if I don't feel gratitude? Isn't it hypocritical? Isn't it better to say nothing than to say something you don't really mean?" "No, it's not better to say nothing if you don't feel it. It's better to say thank you. It doesn't matter whether you feel it. You will some day." And then the coup de grace which always got to me. . . "She won't be here forever, and by the time you get around to feeling grateful, she'll be dead and gone and then it will be too late." And so, I'd go to the phone. She was right, you know. My gratitude has increased over the years, and I do wish I had been a little more enthusiastic in expressing my gratitude. And, yes, I do wish I had a chance to say thank you for one dollar bills and for birthday cards even with no money in them which she stood in a shop and hunted for, reading as many as necessary until she had the one that said what she wanted to say. So, yes mother was right about saying "thank you."

Gratitude turns out to be pretty important. For one thing, it's healthy. C. S. Lewis observed that people who are humble and balanced and happy are the ones who are always complimenting and thanking others while the "cranks, malcontents and misfits" are stingy with their praise and gratitude.

> "Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible" he said. [*Reflections on the Psalms,* p. 80]

Lewis also argued that praising and thanking actually enhance the human experience of pleasure. "Isn't it beautiful?" we say to whomever is sitting beside us in Orchestra Hall. "Lovely, isn't it?" we remark to one another in front of a work of art. "They're wonderful!" people were saying last evening when we switched on our electric sheep grazing in front of the Garth. "Thank you, I love you too," we say to our beloved.

> "Make a joyful noise to the Lord . . .
> come into his presence with singing . . .
> Enter his gates with thanksgiving, . . ."
> the Psalmist said.

Garrison Keillor's short stories and monologues are often about grace and gratitude. In one, he observes that in Lake Wobegon car ownership is a matter of faith. Protestants all drove Fords and adorned them with scripture. Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death" looks particularly good on a license plate cover.

The best was Brother Louie whose Ford Fairlane was a "rolling display of scripture truth, equipped not only with verses on the license plate, but also across the dashboard, both sunvisors, the rubber floormats, ashtray and glove compartment."

> "Finally, one year, Louie found a company in Indiana that advertised custom-made musical horns. Louie's horn played the first eight notes of the Doxology. It sounded like a trumpet. He blew it at pedestrians, oncoming traffic and sometimes just for his own pleasure. On occasion, vexed by a fellow driver, he gave in to wrath and leaned on the horn, only to hear, 'Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow.' It calmed him down right away." [*Lake Wobegon Days*, p. 112-115]

It's not just a matter of good manners. The theologians have always known that the basic religious feeling is awe — or gratitude. The great Karl Barth who wrote twelve enormous and enormously important volumes of dogmatic theology could, at times, be startlingly simple.

> "Grace," he said, "demands the answer of gratitude. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo."

And Robert McAfee Brown, defining the basis of his theological style once wrote,

> "The distinctive word in the Christian vocabulary about God is grace" — God's unmerited, unconditional love for us." And, "If grace is the distinctive word to describe God's attitude toward us, the word that describes (Christianity) our response is gratitude." [*The Pseudonyms of God*]

That's a provocative suggestion. The distinctive response to God for the Christian — the one who knows God through Jesus Christ — is not what we think. It is not obedience, not following rules, not reciting creeds, not maintaining purity, but being grateful, saying "thank you."

The same person who forced the issue of gratitude on me, also made certain that we went to church on Thanksgiving Eve to one of those ecumenical community services. When I objected to that and asked why — after all, those services have a way of being fairly bland and boring — she said, "because I like the hymns. Thanksgiving hymns are the best." Since then I've come to agree.

John Calvin understood that when it comes to the basic affirmations of faith, things work better if we affirm them by singing. The test of theology, echoes Robert McAfee Brown, is whether it can be set to music. And so he too concluded that Thanksgiving hymns are best and votes for "Now Thank We All Our God" as the best all around, all purpose hymn suitable, he says, for every occasion: the baptism of a child, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, a wedding, a funeral.

> "Now thank we all our God
> With heart and hands and voices, . . .
> Who, from our mothers' arms,
> Hath blessed us on our way. . . ."

Grace and gratitude — so central to Christian faith — actually are easier for us to discuss than experience. That is the point of one of the more difficult stories Jesus ever told.

In the middle of the story according to Matthew, Peter asks Jesus a series of questions. They are the kind of questions you and I might ask: about why suffering and death are necessary; about why it's necessary to forgive people who have offended us and if we do get around to forgiving, how many times do we have to do it before we can let them have what they have coming? And then he asks the basic entrepreneurial question . . . "What am I going to get out of this?" Only he asks it by making a kind of self-serving statement, the way children do sometimes. "We have left all to follow you," Peter says, expecting, I think, Jesus to say, "And it will be worth it in the end, Peter." Instead, however, he tells this difficult parable.

"The Kingdom of God," he says, "is like this." It's like a man who owns a vineyard. It's harvest time. The grapes are ready. If you know anything about it — and it's amazing how many people know a lot about the grape — you know that timing is everything. The big vineyard owner needs grape pickers today. Lots of them. So he goes to the town square at six a.m. when the laborers gather in order to find work and he hires everyone there — for the going daily rate. It's a big vineyard. He goes back at nine and hires some more. It soon becomes apparent that the job isn't going to get done so at noon and at three he goes back into town and hires another group. Finally in a last big push, at five p.m., with one hour remaining, he hires another group of laborers.

At quitting time, six p.m., the workers line up to be paid. The owner starts with the men most recently hired, the ones who worked one hour — and gives them a full day's pay, in full view of everybody else, apparently. They are pretty happy. He then pays the group that began at three p.m. a full day's wages, and the workers who started at noon and nine a.m. a full pay check for each. And I think the ones who have been working since six a.m. can't believe what they are seeing. Surely they are going to receive a bonus. But no, when their turn comes, they receive a full day's pay, just what the owner agreed to pay them.

They are not happy, not at all. They grumble: "It's not fair, we've been out there in the burning sun all day long." Their complaint, when you listen carefully, is not about the amount they received, it's about the vineyard owner's generosity. It doesn't feel fair. Their argument is with his grace.

He catches them at it and says, "Are you envious because I'm generous?" The answer, of course, is "yes." You bet they were envious — resentful — angry. It wasn't fair! It's the way we think naturally, apparently. Quid pro quo religion. We do good things. God rewards us. But Jesus is proposing a radical way of thinking about God and religion. God is not an accountant, keeping track of all the good deeds people perform in order to reward each one appropriately. God is more like a gracious parent — or gracious grandparent — who loves without regard to performance, goodness, obedience, purity. God's love for each — God's unconditional love is where religion begins and it depends on nothing in the person. It is grace: pure, as the hymn says, "Amazing Grace" — and it reduces us to nothing but gratitude. What can you say to grace except "thank you"?

For years Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and theologian, now in middle age, lived with a sense of resentment, mostly unacknowledged, that his father always loved his younger brother more than him. For years there had been, in his heart, a gap: not overt conflict, just a lingering and hurtful distance. Recently Nouwen was in a very severe accident. He was hit by a car and was in a hospital, conscious but aware that he was near death. Totally unexpectedly, his father, advanced in age, appeared at his bedside, having flown all the way from Holland to be with his son. It was, he knew, one of the most important things that ever happened. For the first time in his life he said, "I love you" to his father and expressed gratitude for his father's love. [*The Return Of The Prodigal Son*, p. 80]

It was like the flood gates opened. Years of resentment melted, years of unexpressed gratitude and love were set free. Nouwen, the theologian, put it, of course, in a theological context.

> "God's unlimited, unconditional love melts away all resentments and anger and makes me free to love." [*Ibid*]

The laborers in the parable who had been working all day, that is to say, could have been happy at their comrades' blessing. They could have been glad and grateful for the owner's grace instead of resentful.

His experience with his father was a kind of religious conversion for Henri Nouwen. And he began to think about the experience and the expression of gratitude in a new way, which as I read it, sounded very familiar. Nouwen concludes that if you don't express it you won't experience it. He wrote:

"I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I know that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given me as a gift of love."

Gratitude opens us to grace, that is to say. It's more important than our immediate experience of reward, pleasure, gratification. "It doesn't matter if you feel it," I was told. "Say it anyway. You'll feel it some day." And it was true.

It's a choice we make: to wait until we have what we assume we are entitled to, full larder, good job, growing portfolio, fulfilling relationships, great sex, health, vigor, and then, sated, we will say, "thank you." Although you know, when you think like that, the terrible truth is that in your heart you really believe that you, yourself, are responsible, that you are getting what you deserve. It's a choice. It is possible to think like that and it's also possible to see it all as grace, a gift, and to begin with gratitude.

It is the week of Thanksgiving. I invite you to choose to be grateful, to say it, whether you feel it or not — because saying "thank you" will, I know, open a window into your heart through which love and kindness and grace will enter.

I invite you to do what I suppose you and I ought to be doing always, and that is to identify and name the grace in your life and to say thank you for it. We don't do it, I suppose, because, like those hard working, all day laborers, we're thinking about what we've earned and what we deserve — our entitlement which always means keeping your eye on what others are getting and which leads inevitably to the sad distancing of resentment. That's how we relate with one another, I fear: entitlement relationships with friends and lovers and spouses and children and parents. I've earned your affection. I'm entitled to it. And I know that deep in our hearts we do have trouble letting go of the notion that God loves us when we're good and productive, when we obey the rules. That what blessing we enjoy is what we have earned. It's difficult to let go of that in order to entertain and embrace that stunning idea of Jesus that God loves because God is love: that in Jesus Christ God comes to be with us and to gather us into the household — the Kingdom.

We don't do it, partly I think, because sometimes gratitude doesn't seem appropriate. Isn't it a little superficial to talk about gratitude in a world like this . . . a world in which wars continue and poverty deepens and little children die unnecessarily? It is then, when religious sentiment confronts the reality of life, that gratitude becomes specifically Christian, called out of us, not by a philosopher or a poet but by our brother Jesus, our Lord, who died — loving God, loving us. That dying calls grace into our lives and it is grace to uphold us in every experience of grief and pain and anxiety and death so that even then, at life's extremities, we find ourselves saying, "Thank you, God."

So — shall we? Shall we do the obvious: get out the pencil and paper and list — "grace for which I am grateful"?

Start with the world — the beautiful, fragile creation.

"O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide gray skies
Thy mists that roll and rise!
Lord, I do fear
Thous't made the world too
beautiful this year." [*God's World*, Edna St. Vincent Millay]

And then the part of the world which by grace is ours . . . the nation. . .the Native Americans whose precious culture preceded our appearance by a millennium . . . the Pilgrim fathers and mothers burying their old ones and their babies — one half of their small number — to begin a new experiment on these shores. And he government, the President, the senators, the congressional representatives, the politicians, debating, arguing, posturing but, by God's grace, governing without coercion or revolution for two centuries.

For work to do and friends to enjoy, for beauty wherever it is found, in magnificent music, gorgeous art; for the recurring miracle of children; for people who do jobs because they believe in them; for teachers and social workers and physical therapists; for physicians and attorneys and bankers and police and firefighters and street cleaners and musicians.

Make a list of grace in your life — people who love and trust you, who care about you and for you. Thank God for them but don't let this day or this week pass without saying thank you and telling them that you love them.

For the mystery of human intimacy, for growth and maturation and aging; for completion and even for dying.

For churches, unlikely gatherings of saints and sinners, who from one generation to the next pass along the unlikely story of a God whose name is love and whose son is Jesus; unlikely gray buildings nestled between towers of commerce and business and entertainment, reminders of that kingdom ever coming. And for grace, amazing and abundant; for God's incredible love which we see all around us, and which has been given to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

"Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom the world rejoices;
Who, from our mothers' arms,
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today."

Amen.